

Push and Pull

(The competencies required for working internationally)

1. Introduction

This article explains the research underpinning of the International Preferences Indicator (IPI). It looks at the roots of the IPI, namely the 'push and pull' focus in both intercultural research and within the wider field of management and leadership writing.

2. Background to push and pull competencies

The business world of the 21st century is marked by rapidly expanding contact across boundaries and cultures, and also by 'VUCA' - volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. An ever-wider range of people in the workforce must have the ability to interact and achieve effective outcomes with counterparts who have different behaviours, values and ways of perceiving reality, often in very diverse and fluid contexts. Whereas it was enough to train only a relatively small elite group of expats for international assignments, the need now is to prepare people throughout the organisation for daily global interactions with colleagues and other stakeholders.

With the 'assignment' focus in mind, intercultural literature and training traditionally focused on specific national cultures with information about both hard facts and cultural features, which often led to recommended 'dos' and 'don'ts'. In parallel, the publishing of research into cultural parameters – e.g. Hall (1959), Hofstede (1980), Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997) – also formed the background to preparing people for international business. This research often used linear scales to show where different cultures stand with regard to such things as communicative directness/indirectness or sense of organizational/social hierarchy.

Although these approaches still have their place, those operating in the global economy at any level need to have clear behavioural solutions for 'managing' both themselves and others they encounter in their working life. Current challenges still include longer-term foreign postings for managers and their families, but are increasingly characterised by shorter-term project work, perhaps in multiple locations, or by vast numbers of interactions at a more basic operational level such as those involving call centres, shared-service organisations and the like. Many of these contacts now have a significant virtual element bringing extra challenges to

competency development. Indeed, some of those needing global skills may never leave a desk in an office in their home-town.

The IPI is published by WorldWork Ltd and uses a competency-based approach to help people identify ways in which they can become more effective when working internationally. It uses a self-report questionnaire and provides normed feedback on the participant's focus of energy across 10 dimensions categorised into two contrasting styles – the 'Push' and the 'Pull' approach. It is used in workshops or training sessions where feedback can be provided to a whole group at once and where participants can benefit from peer support sessions. The IPI enables participants to become more effective in an intercultural context through the implementation of a concrete, pragmatic and behavioural action plan. It can also provide important insights into the styles inherent in a team of people who work together to enable them to reach a better profile and balance in relation to the overall tasks that they are dealing with.

Full details of the International Preferences Indicator can be found at:

<https://worldwork.global/international-preference-indicator-ipi/>

'Push' is 'inside-out' and refers to pushing forward personal/organisational goals, values and messages in a confident, assertive way despite pressures to compromise. This brings a sense of purpose and direction not only for the individual but also for those around him/her. 'Pull', on the other hand, has an 'outside-in' focus and implies drawing others toward oneself by showing a personal interest, winning trust by accepting some of their different behaviours and ideas, sensing and adapting to their unspoken thoughts and feelings, and exploring their ideas and agenda.

Central to the IPI rationale is the notion that these two approaches need to work together in harmony and that managing the situational dynamic as a 'dance' between the two approaches is crucial to successful intercultural interactions. Gaining an appreciation of the diverse perspectives of others, for example, can enable you to communicate your own needs and intentions transparently and sensitively. However, the questionnaire itself recognises that in the real world we have limited energy to range our focus equally across all the behaviours and qualities linked to push and pull. The IPI thus forces participants to distribute their energy, attention and emphasis across 10 qualities (5 associated with the push approach and five with the pull approach) that make the difference in transferring professional skills to an unfamiliar cultural environment. (See Table 1 below for a list of the 10 competencies). It then looks at the implications for dealing with uncertainty and the unknown, as well as finding drive and balance when working in different types of international roles.

Table 1 – The IPI Competencies

Push Competencies	Pull Competencies
Inner Purpose	Flexible Behaviour
Spirit of Adventure	Welcoming Strangers
Resilience	Acceptance
Focus on Goals	New Thinking
Exposing Intentions	Attuned

3. Sources of push-pull competencies in working across cultures

The first key source is the findings of quantitative and qualitative research data that answers the question: ‘What are the qualities we require for transferring our professional skills into unfamiliar cultural environments’. For example, the research of Gudykunst (1991) on explicit meta-communication and Kealey’s (1996) research on emotional maturity support the identification of the push skills of ‘Exposing Intentions’ and ‘Resilience’ respectively. Milton & Janet Bennett’s work (1979) and Lennox & Wolfe (1984) are some of the sources that underlie pull concepts of ‘Acceptance’ and ‘Flexible Behaviour’ in turn. There are research findings justifying all of the other qualities included in the set.

Secondly, larger-scale projects involving researching the dynamics of international collaboration seem to identify a combination of push and pull approaches. The Global People project (2009) researched cross-cultural collaboration between UK and Chinese academics in a major educational project involving the development of e-learning materials. It identified all the 10 qualities used in IPI as critical to successful interaction within that project.

There are relatively few empirical studies of remote teams and even fewer that pay serious attention to the views of locally hired staff and to what the competencies of expatriate managers look like from the local perspective. However, Goodall & Roberts (2003) drew on a large corpus of data about the experiences of senior expatriate managers in a major energy company in aligning local teams back with head office. This research indicated that local staff seemed to appreciate Peter, a highly successful expatriate manager in Colombia, as much for his push skills as his pull ones. For example, he shows cultural sensitivity in his approach to ‘Welcoming Strangers’:

‘Colombians say ‘hello’ every time they meet in the corridor. Jones (a senior expatriate) doesn’t and people don’t like it, he’s antipático . . . Colombians are macho but are polite—hello how are you—a Colombian boss would say hello to everyone . . . It’s important to be ‘simpático’ to humble people like the coffee lady, and Peter does this’.

But he is equally praised for his high focus on ‘Exposing Intentions’:

‘I feel with Peter that we’re always getting all the information that cascades down. I’m sure he has to keep things back but it doesn’t feel like it’

as well as his strong sense of ‘Inner Purpose’.

Another manager in China struggles to combine push and pull skills so confidently and is criticised for it. While he is praised for his knowledge of China and the local language and culture, his sensitivity to local staff could also be frustrating. They wanted more direct, simple messages:

‘John is very kind, doesn’t want to upset people in front of others so he doesn’t say things straight. There are moments when he should be more direct.’

A third source for the push/pull focus of the IPI is the authors’ own experience of working and living abroad, experiencing ‘culture shock’ and training thousands of international managers and professionals. This work in learning and development spawned the creation of *A Case for Global Leadership: the Kai Bendix story* (2010) from WorldWork, which is a film-based documentary about the real experience of a German leader facing three major challenges while building a successful business in India. The story reveals that Kai is successful in handling issues of corruption, cross-functional in-fighting, and disaffected Indian partners not because he is willing to adapt his principles in an unfamiliar cultural context, but because he sticks to what he believes in (high ‘Inner Purpose’ and ‘Resilience’) while drawing on relationships and cultural sensitivity to make sense of this to his Indian reports. He seems to ‘be himself’ but ‘with skills’ which come from a sensitive combination of push and pull.

The concept of push and pull not only makes sense of the different findings of research on international competency, it also has deep roots in philosophical and cultural history and broader management topics such as communication, teams, influencing and leadership.

4. Roots of push and pull in communication theory

At the heart of communication theory is the concept that communication is never a simple direct act, but an instinctive and unconscious attempt to ‘push out’ encoded symbol messages that make sense to others, and ‘pull out’ or decode meaning from the messages that come back. This process of translating meanings into words and

behaviours, and then back again into meanings, is very much based on a person's cultural background as well as their individual influences and traits: these differences in approach can lead to problems! Push skills such as framing your intentions and pull skills such as picking up indirect signals help to reduce communication breakdowns when working across cultures. However, it is not necessary to focus solely on international communication to sense the importance of push vs. pull.

In a Western context, Aristotle's ideas on persuasion – which still hold much sway in rhetorical training today – established that alongside displaying one's own credibility (Ethos) and logical argument (Logos) – both basically a push style – must come an appeal to the emotion of the audience (Pathos), in effect pulling them towards you, most obviously by appealing to their values. Additionally, the concept of dialogue (Greek *dia logos*, = 'through meaning') has its roots in the Ancient World and has attracted a huge revival in modern management, leadership and intercultural literature – Bohm (1996), Isaacs (1999), Senge (2006).

To engage in dialogue is to depart from regular communication (e.g. 'discussion' and 'debate') by employing a more profound push and pull approach to create collective understanding via shared visions, forging alignment and trust, and maintaining commitment to the process and outcomes. Real dialogue also allows diverse perspectives to be aired that would otherwise be lost and hence potential synergies to be achieved. One of the key thinkers is David Bohm, originally a physicist, who stresses the need to shift from 'Newtonian' (linear, traditional approaches) to the 'quantum' (systems thinking, collective leadership) more appropriate for working with diversity in a systems-based economy.

The ground-breaking work of systems theorist Peter Senge (2006) also sees dialogue as central to the organizational learning without which organisations cannot survive. When dialogue is joined with systems thinking, Senge argues, there is the possibility of better addressing complexity and focusing on deep-seated structural issues and forces, rather than being diverted by over-focus on personality and leadership style. Indeed, such is the emphasis on dialogue in his work that it could almost be put alongside systems thinking itself as the central feature of his approach.

In any environment – and especially in a diverse, multicultural environment – dialogue skills can be reframed as 'negotiating' reality or meaning. Almost synonymous with communicative push-pull are the terms 'advocacy' and 'inquiry'. Senge refers to the appropriate use of a combination of high advocacy and high inquiry, i.e. stating clearly what you think or want and explaining the reasoning behind your view, whilst at the same time striving to understand the reasoning of others and inviting them to question their own reasoning. This means of exploring and testing both one's own reasoning - and, almost simultaneously, the reasoning of

others - is effectively to remain at the interface between the push/pull approaches. Especially in intercultural interactions, this approach enables each to understand other's intentions, cultural drivers and resultant behaviours.

In the IPI, the response to the push-pull dilemma is reflected in the *Constructing Meaning* style which combines 'exposing intentions' and 'attuned' and which therefore reflects the individual style that you bring to this concept of negotiating meaning when working internationally.

5. Push and pull in team theory, influencing & leadership

Teams

Advocacy vs Inquiry was also one of three bipolar dimensions in the work of Marcial Losada (1999, 2005), which analysed the complex dynamics of team interactions and resultant productivity. The crucial conclusion was that a balance of advocacy and inquiry, combined in a ratio of almost 3:1 positive to negative interactions during team meetings, was the key to dramatic productivity growth. It also indicated that high-performing teams differed from low-performing ones by having a balanced focus on 'self' and 'other' in team interactions, rather than allowing a focus on 'self' to dominate.

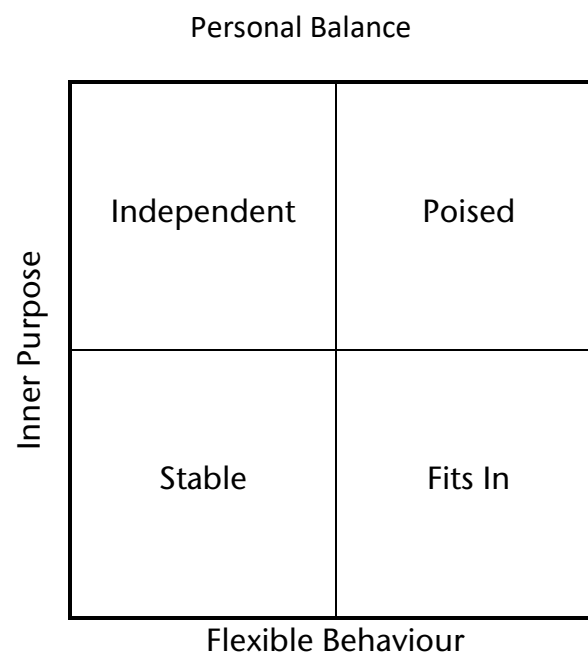
Table 2 – High Performing Teams

	Connectivity	Inquiry/Advocacy	Self/Other	Positive/Negative
High Performance	High	Balanced	Balanced	High
Medium performance	Medium	Towards advocacy	Towards self	Balanced
Low performance	Low	Advocacy dominant	Self is dominant	Negative dominant

This clearly extends the focus on push and pull beyond communication to issues of identity – the extent to which you identify with the needs of the team as a whole (and others within the team), or with your own separate individual needs within that team. According to Tuckman (1965), all teams go through a stage of 'forming' and 'storming' where individuals search for finding an identity and role within a new team. In multi-cultural teams this is made more complex by the need to build trust

that others are competent and reliable despite their very different ways of doing things. There is a danger of allowing low trust to encourage team leaders and members to push for their own values and goals without adapting and fitting in to other ways of behaving, without listening to others ideas or reading their signals. Equally (and it is important to keep this in mind when attempting to apply the positivity aspects of Losada's model) there is also a danger of resorting to a lack of self-assertiveness where the opportunity to push for important ideas at an individual level is lost, and the result is what Nancy Adler (2008) calls a 'ritual politeness' that can lead to unproductivity.

This need to resolve the dilemma of adapting versus remaining true to your own values and beliefs, the need to stick to goals without losing inquisitiveness about different ways of doing things, is also critical to the concept of 'International Styles' in the IPI. (See the focus on Personal Balance and Drive in the illustration below). It is also critical to the needs of teams and individuals that are operating outside their normal comfort zones in unfamiliar cultural settings.



Influencing

Once almost completely associated with the exercise of power, the term 'influence' in modern management is now frequently used to refer to essential skills in changing people's actions, behaviours or attitudes, especially in situations where there is no

positional power. The rise of matrixed working, shared leadership, collaboration and 'teaming' has led to a large amount of research, publication and training on this topic.

Harrison & Kouzes (1980) were among the first to look at the influencing process in terms of psychological energies. This energy is described as how one individual tries to change or affect another, and is again dichotomous.

One of the most useful and practical ways of viewing influence is to look at the outcomes of influence attempts in terms of a scale of resultant levels of engagement (Yukl 2009) as follows:

Commitment – intrinsic motivation on actions or behaviour

Compliance – requests followed, but with low or even minimal effort and motivation

Resistance – active or passive avoidance of following through influence attempts.

How to effectively ensure maximum commitment from colleagues? Gary Yukl has identified four influencing tactics that have been found to be the most effective multi-directionally in organisations and (though more research is still pending) across cultures. These tactics too can helpfully be thought of as being more push or pull or 'interfacing' between the two:

1. *Rational persuasion* – using facts, data and logic (push)
2. *Inspirational appeals* – connecting with people's value systems (pull)
3. *Consultation* – involving people (pull)
4. *Collaboration* – working together with others (push-pull)

Leadership: authenticity and adaptation

There are two areas of leadership that connect to the concept of push and pull. On one hand, those that focus on authenticity looking inside, discovering themselves, and expressing their values through congruent behaviours. In the face of a growing distrust of leaders, Bill George in his book on 'Authentic Leadership' called for qualities associated with the IPI push qualities 'Inner Purpose' 'Focus on Goals', and 'Resilience' – in other words, having a passion for purpose in their lives, practice their values consistently and have the self-discipline to get results. This was backed up by research that indicated that successful leaders did not seem to share any specific quality except they had built self-awareness from their experiences, and leadership from their own life-stories.

The danger of over-focusing on authentic leadership is of course that you may lose contact with the very different life-stories of others, and the ability to pull other people towards you through adaptability and empathy is also a critical quality of leadership.

This is particularly important for managers with global responsibilities, who are working across distance and infrastructure differences as well as across differences in cultural values and expectations. Deal et al (2009) cite research indicating that success as a global leader depends significantly on the leader's ability to interact effectively with others who are culturally different. To do this, leaders must be able to adapt their behaviour appropriately to the particular circumstances in which they are working. Cultural adaptability is critical to successful global leadership

Kevin Cashman (2008) in 'Leadership from the Inside Out' speaks of the need for 'centered fluidity' in leadership and calls for authenticity to be combined with agility/flexibility and listening skills – a combination of the best of push and pull. He calls for a '720 degree' self-reflection which goes beyond the traditional 'outer' 360 feedback with the attendant risk of giving feedback that only helps individuals create themselves in the image of others. With an 'inner' 360 feedback leaders take a long hard look at themselves and the behaviours that may create advantages or problems for them.

This need to take a long hard look at where your own balance comes from – being driven by you own values or fitting in with the context around you - is supported at a deep level by the IPI. In the section on International Styles there is an opportunity to understand the degree to which in unfamiliar cultural contexts your balance comes from 'Inner Purpose' or 'Flexible Behaviour', as well as how you deal with the unexpected – do you experiment with ways of handling differences ('Resilience') or do you mainly remain open to differences you encounter ('Acceptance'), or, and this is a major feature of the IPI, how do you balance these two approaches yourself?

So ultimately, the IPI underlines the importance of 'versatility' in producing effective modern management and leadership. Two leading authorities – Rob Kaiser and Bob Kaplan (2003) – define versatility as:

"...having a full range of motion, able to freely use opposing leadership approaches, unrestricted by a bias for one and a prejudice against the other.

This is a view of versatility as a mastery of opposites. It is rooted in the tensions and trade-offs that make leadership a balancing act. Like the Taoist notion of yin and yang, the idea is that it takes two complementary elements to form a whole. Neither is complete without the other.

Most beliefs about leadership, it turns out, are only half right. Yes, it's important for leaders to have a strong, visible presence. It's also important for leaders to recognize other people and put them in a strong position..."

The IPI offers not only leaders and managers, but also the many others involved in diverse working environments, the chance to experience their own approach and through this to become more effective in their work in the rapidly changing global economy.

6. Summary of benefits of IPI

In terms of other benefits of the IPI for the organisation:

- Builds a better understanding of what qualities are required of professionals working internationally
- Helps individuals to identify the gap between the demands of their role and the people skills they bring to working internationally
- Sets out a clear development plan for managing these gaps
- Provides a support for team coaching and development when needing to deliver results in an international context
- Gets individuals and teams to reflect on how they should respond to such challenges as avoiding misunderstandings, maintaining motivation, and dealing with the unknown when working internationally
- Provide the above benefits in an interesting interactive session that can be delivered in a workshop

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